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Dear Mrs Lishman

Inspection of Northumberland Church of England Academy Childminder Agency

Thank you for your support and cooperation during the recent inspection on 6 and 7 December 2017. I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. This was the agency's first inspection and was carried out under the Childcare Act 2006, as amended by the Children and Families Act 2014.

Northumberland Church of England Academy Childminder Agency is effective.

Leadership and management are effective.

The quality of the agency's services is effective.

The impact of the agency's services on the quality of the education and care provided by its childminders is effective.

Summary findings

The childminder agency is operated by Northumberland Church of England Academy. It is in its third year of operation and has registered five childminders. The agency forms an integral part of the early years provision offered by the Northumberland Church of England Academy. Building on the academy's ethos, to act as a 'catalyst for change,' the agency enables the academy to work with children and families within their community from the earliest opportunity.

The significant, combined experience of the leadership team ensures that the registration process for childminders is both thorough and proportionate. The safety and welfare of children are the agency's primary concern. Leaders are not afraid to ask challenging questions when suitability checks raise concerns about either applicants or their household members. They see the quality and rigour of the registration process as crucial to ensuring children's continued safety.

The leaders of the agency are clear about their role as a regulator. Clear policies and procedures, which are implemented effectively, ensure that they are able to fulfil this in practice. Leaders demonstrate a thorough understanding of how to safeguard children. They are very clear about what to do should they find out of a child protection allegation or concern.

All of the agency's childminder's are new to the profession. They cannot speak more highly of the support they have received from the agency, particularly the director of early years, who is their main point of contact. The agency's childminders are first and foremost members of the local community; some are parents of children who attend the academy. For several, the opportunity to become registered childminders has significantly improved their self-confidence and self-esteem. The quality and timeliness of the support and training received are strengths of the agency. From the moment the childminders attend their first briefing session, they receive substantial, individual support.

Parents' feedback to the childminders is positive regarding the quality of care children receive. While this information is fed back to leaders within the agency, they do not routinely seek the views of parents directly, in order to inform the direction of their ongoing work. Similarly, there is work to do to develop systems for sharing the outcome of the childminder's quality assurance visits with parents.

Leaders believe passionately in the importance of the early years and see the agency's work as crucial to improving the life chances of children and young people in their community. Leaders are enthusiastic and ambitious. They strive to continually improve the quality of their service. However, the use of self-evaluation to set priorities for improvement and monitor the impact of the training and support provided is at an early stage and requires greater focus.

Recommendations

- Strengthen the agency's strategy for communicating with its parents both in terms of gathering their views about the quality of the agency, as well as sharing the outcomes of the agency's quality assurance visits to childminders.
- Improve existing procedures for monitoring and evaluation in order to better assess the impact of the training and support delivered, so that clear targets for improvement can be set and monitored.

The effectiveness of the leadership and management of the childminder agency

- All those involved in the running of this agency are passionate about the importance of investing in the youngest children in their community. Through the creation of this childminder agency, leaders have already started optimising the early years of local children; recognising the positive impact this will have on their future.
- Leaders have a good understanding of their local community. They are adept at using information gathered from their full range of early years provision in order to inform ongoing planning and activities. For example, children's development of communication and language, as well as their social and emotional skills, are prioritised as part of the curriculum offered by childminders.
- The combined expertise of the academy's early years, human resource and welfare teams has ensured the development of a robust and challenging registration process. Leaders are not complacent. They have reviewed and reflected on each applicant's registration journey. Consequently, processes and documentation have been refined over time, ensuring only those suitable to work with children are registered by the agency.
- Leaders clearly recognise that an informed and detailed registration process is pivotal to securing high quality provision which actively safeguards children. As part of the registration process, applicants must demonstrate that they have a thorough understanding of both the learning and development and welfare requirements of the early years foundation stage. This initial assessment gives leaders a comprehensive understanding of a providers' strengths and areas for development, giving a firm foundation upon which providers can build.
- Effective partnership working between the local college and the agency has ensured the development of a detailed and informative pre-registration training package. This bespoke package builds on existing training for home based child carers, ensuring applicants come away with a greater understanding of both the early years foundation stage and the importance of good nutrition for young children. This course has now been awarded professional accreditation.
- Leaders understand the link between ongoing professional development and good quality early years provision. As such, all childminders registered with the agency must hold, or be working towards, a level 3 qualification.
- The agency recognises that childminder agencies are a new concept and have worked hard to raise awareness of their role both locally and nationally. There is a good working relationship between the agency and their local authority. Joint registration and training visits have taken place between agency staff and the local authority's development workers. Protocols are also in place between the agency and key local authority departments, including the authority's designated officer and safeguarding team. This ensures the effective sharing of information. As a result, partners are clear about the important distinction between Ofsted registered and agency registered childminders.

- Nationally, the academy's director of early years has worked closely with leaders and managers of other childminding agencies to devise and share best practice.
- Leaders have a detailed knowledge and understanding of safeguarding. They have strengthened their policies regarding enforcement since registration and are clearer regarding their roles and responsibilities in relation to this.
- Assessing an applicant's knowledge and understanding of safeguarding children is an important part of the registration process. As well as completing an initial pre-registration safeguarding course, applicants are also required to undertake designated person training within their first year of registration.
- Childminder's ongoing understanding of their responsibilities to safeguard children is routinely assessed through regular monitoring visits. A range of scenario based questions are used to test out practitioner's application of their learning.
- Leaders regularly get feedback from childminders regarding the range and quality of support and training they offer. They have used this information to improve the pre-registration training course as well as procedures for registration. However, they are not yet directly seeking the views of their parents, relying instead on feedback from childminders. In addition, more work needs to be done to ensure the outcome of quality assurance visits are shared with parents.

The quality of the agency's services

- Leaders provide a wide range of good quality training, advice and guidance. Given the small number of registered childminders, this support is mainly offered on a one-to-one basis, tailored to suit the very specific needs of each individual childminder. Topics cover a wide range of subjects, including planning and assessment, nutrition, safeguarding and applications for business grants.
- The director of early years has worked closely with both the local college and the local authority development workers to ensure the delivery of a high quality training package, which meets the needs of the childminders and improves their practice overtime. As well as group training, childminders receive bespoke one-to-one training sessions designed to meet specific developmental needs.
- Information provided to childminders before they make an application to the agency is clear and helpful. The agency makes clear the two routes to registration and the difference between these. Those who have chosen to register with the agency have been clear that the level of advice and support available to them was their prime reason for choosing this option.
- Working to effect change from within the community, those childminders currently registered are strong ambassadors for the agency. They are vocal about the quality of the support received from the agency. They believe that their involvement with the agency has helped to improve both their self-confidence and skills, enabling them to set up their own successful businesses. The very nurturing, hands on approach has facilitated individual childminders' engagement in the training offered. One childminder said; 'Without this agency I would not be where I am now.'

- When concerns arise, leaders are uncompromising in the rigour with which they investigate these. As such, registration decisions are accurate and only those suitable to work with children are registered.
- All childminders have an individual action plan. This forms the basis of their ongoing professional support and development. These plans are reviewed regularly at monitoring meetings and additional steps are added as they progress with their training. Childminders were able to show inspectors how they are beginning to put their training into practice, and could articulate the benefit of this. This one-to-one support also complements and builds on the work being undertaken by some childminders as part of their level 3 qualification.
- Working alongside the academy's provision for two-year-olds, nursery and Reception classes, the childminder agency ensures that parents can access a flexible provision which meets their needs.
- The Grace Darling partnership is an excellent example of partnership working between the statutory, private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sectors. The agency's childminders work closely with the school nursery and a local private provider to provide seamless childcare provision for parents. Teachers from the academy's nursery provision spoke highly of the benefits of this partnership working. In particular, they felt that it improved communication between parents and settings and helped create a consistent approach to issues, such as behaviour management.
- Opportunities for childminders to be mentored are impressive. Planning for a child's time in nursery is shared with childminders, enabling them to build on what children are learning in school. Childminders also have the opportunity to directly observe teachers and staff working with early years children. Opportunities for joint moderation are also planned for the spring term, in order to improve the accuracy and consistency of assessments.
- While registration processes are up and running, leaders are at the early stages of implementing quality assurance visits. Childminders are provided with an informative report following the visit, which clearly sets out their strengths and areas for development. Joint observations of practice undertaken during this inspection confirm that the agency's assessments of the quality of provision are accurate. The process for completing these visits is still under review. Leaders are seeking the opinion of both local childminders and other agencies, nationally, about how these should proceed in the future. The outcome of these visits will be shared with parents through the agency's website, though this is still being developed.

The impact of the agency's services on the quality of the education and care provided by its childminders

- The impact of the agency's pre-registration training is seen through the good quality childminding practice observed. Children's self-esteem and confidence have blossomed as a result of the childminders' patient, nurturing nature. Young children were confident talking to inspectors about the pictures they were cutting

out for their stocking decoration. Young babies have quickly formed affectionate attachments and were seen to be comfortable with their childminder. Through knowing these youngest children well, childminders are able to plan appropriately for their next steps, ensuring that they make good progress in their development.

- The agency provides its childminders with a range of good quality policies and procedures, which they adapt to meet the specific needs and requirements of their setting. From discussions with childminders, it is clear that they understand these policies and are able to use them to the best effect within their daily practice. Forms about children's details are easy to complete and childminders appreciate having these templates to use when they first begin their childminding practice.
- Childminders are hugely complimentary about the range of support received from agency staff. In particular, opportunities to learn from early years teachers and staff in the academy's early years settings has had a positive impact on the childminders' confidence and helped them develop their own teaching skills. Sharing planning and working together as a single early years team have enabled children to make accelerated progress in personal, social and emotional development as well as communication and language.
- For those childminders who have been with the agency the longest, their progression is clear. They have been coached to become reflective practitioners. Their reflective journals are detailed and clearly show how children have flourished in their care.
- This childminder agency is highly valued; it is the final piece of the early years puzzle for the academy and its community and allows them to effect positive change from the earliest opportunity. Using what they know about children's achievement within the academy, leaders are able to support childminders to develop children's skills in communication and language from an early age; so they are ready to access the school curriculum.
- The training childminders receive has also helped them to encourage young children to take turns, to share and to involve each other in their play. Additional specialist training to help childminders support children with special educational needs and disabilities ensures that all children are able to access the good quality care provided through the agency.

This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jayne Utting
Senior Her Majesty's Inspector (Early Years)
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Information about the inspection

This inspection was carried out by a Senior Her Majesty's Inspector and an early years senior officer. The inspection took place over two days. Inspectors undertook four visits to meet four childminders. These included two interviews with childminders at different stages of their agency journey; one pre-quality assurance visit and one post quality assurance visit. Inspectors also visited two registered individuals to observe childminding practice in order to assess the accuracy of assessment of the quality of care provided. Inspectors held discussions with leaders about their roles and sampled a range of policies, procedures and records designed to ensure the safe and efficient management of the agency. This included records of registration, support visits to childminders and information provided to childminders and parents regarding the support and services available. The views of four childminders and a parent were also taken into account.

Information about the agency

Northumberland Church of England Academy childminder agency registered as a childminder agency in December 2014. The academy's senior leadership team play a significant role in the development and oversight of this agency. However, the Director of early years, is the main point of contact for the agency's childminders, and remains the driving force behind its ongoing development. The agency's main office is based on the Robert Stephenson Campus, Ashington. The agency serves the south east of Northumberland, including Ashington, Lynemouth and Newbiggin-by-the-Sea. The agency currently has five childminders registered. The agency registers childminders on both the Early Years and Childcare Registers. At the time of inspection, the agency was not employing any staff.